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Negotiating Women's Bodies: An Artistic Exploration of Coercion and Agency in Interwar Romanian Gendered Advice Literature

Abstract: This paper analyzes how gendered advice literature informed societal perceptions of women's bodies in interwar Romania, in conjunction with popular music and film. It discusses the changing understandings of beauty within a broader research project on Romanian women's fashion choices, possibilities, and ideas. The tension between agency and coercion on a gendered voice-silence spectrum is exemplified through Marthe Bibesco's *Noblesse de Robe* and Aurel Voina's *Îngrijirea tenului* [Skincare], blended with music and film for a synesthetic experience. Agency (voice) reflects the power of choice, encouraging self-assertion through education. Coercion (silence) signifies a lack of choice, using propaganda to disguise conformity as authenticity. The playlist includes renditions of *Por una cabeza*, the Romanian translation of *Zaraza*, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, and Casablanca's *As Time Goes By*. This multidimensional, interdisciplinary conceptual exercise connects gender dynamics through class, ethnicity, and location, contributing to a better understanding of Romanian gendered communication and culture.

Keywords: interwar Romania, gender, advice literature, Aurel Voina, Marthe Bibesco

Introduction

This paper explores the negotiation of women's bodies in interwar Romania, blending advice literature with images and music. According to Grace Lees-Maffei, advice literature comprises specific texts designed to promote ideal models of behavior.[1] Here, behavior includes engaging in fashion and beauty

1 Grace Lees-Maffei, "From Service to Self-Service: Advice Literature as Design Discourse,

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practices. Negotiations move across and in-between interwar-era dichotomies including progress–conservatism, expansion–contraction, modernity–tradition, and, in this context, agency–coercion.

In this paper, agency represents the power of choice and promotes self-assertion while maintaining propriety and authenticity. The focus is on how women elegantly assert themselves, informed by an understanding of history, culture, and society. The ideal model is strongly encouraged to showcase authenticity and discernment in her attire, attitude, and culture. Meanwhile, coercion signifies a lack of choice, with propaganda and oppression masquerading as encouragement for authenticity, rooted in an ideology that deems authenticity a weakness. The focus is on women's ability to conform to strict rules governing fashion, appearance, and behavior. The ideal model is pressured to adhere to arbitrary standards with some leeway to adopt modern trends. On both ends, it is presented here through textual and visual media, popular music, cinema, and fashion text, where agency encourages and coercion enforces. The interwar press was instrumental in shaping European public opinion and politics through a transnational exchange of ideas that integrated news consumption into everyday life.[2]

The agency–coercion spectrum connects to Jean-Paul Sartre's use of freedom and civic responsibility, where genuine freedom goes beyond simply being free from coercion and requires tangible liberties and social recognition, enabling resistance to oppression and fostering democratic participation beyond personal autonomy alone.[3] The dichotomy has been used to explain political, legal, and social phenomena, but treating economic dependence and intimidation as total coercion oversimplifies women's nuanced agency in non-Western, patriarchal, or religious contexts.[4] The connection was already evident in the late nineteenth century in the legal interpretation of influence, often with the attached adjective "undue," which could invalidate wills or gifts if it overpowered free will.[5] By the

1920–1970," *Journal of Design History*, 14, no. 3 (January 2001): 188, https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/14.3.187.

2 Sarah Newman and Matt Houlbrook, "Introduction. The Press and Popular Culture in Interwar Europe," in *The Press and Popular Culture in Interwar Europe*, eds Sarah Newman and Matt Houlbrook (London: Routledge, 2015), 641–3, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315796949.

3 T. Storm Heter, *Sartre's Ethics of Engagement: Authenticity and Civic Virtue* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 17.

4 Monique Deveaux, "Appeals to Choice and Sexual Equality. Debates over Religious Attire," in *Personal Autonomy in Plural Societies: A Principle and Its Paradoxes*, eds Marie-Claire Foblets, Michele Graziadei, and Alison Dundes Renteln (London: Routledge, 2017), 88–9, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315413617.

5 William Caldwell Anderson, *A Dictionary of Law: Consisting of Judicial Definitions and Explanations of Words, Phrases, and Maxims, and an Exposition of the Principles of Law, Comprising a Dictionary*

late twentieth century, agency became linked to women's empowerment over male dominance and coercion, and to financial and belief systems, with a third dynamic element, subjectivity, shaped by social relationships and gender roles within patriarchal systems.[6]

This interdisciplinary research integrates text analysis with cultural examinations, combining theoretical writings with music and film within a historical context. It explores the social, political, and economic factors shaping evolving beauty standards in Romania. It discusses changing ideas of physical and aesthetic beauty and their reflections in fashion practices, highlighting the complex interplay between agency and coercion through two contrasting literary works. Agency and coercion no longer represent a binary set to simplify or colonize the discourse on morality and social justice. The modern girl became a symbol of the 1920s with her boyish charm and rebellious spirit, embodying the concept of "agency" in a world balancing the trauma of war and the relief of peace. Her identity was influenced by significant advancements in women's emancipation and increased access to public and professional spheres. The Great Depression stalled women's liberation, ending the era of the cloche and slender silhouette.[7] The new woman of the 1930s was a complex figure who balanced progressive ideals with traditional views amid rising radicalization, embodying "coercion" toward the extreme right.[8] This concept would later evolve into the communist new Romanian woman, demonstrating ideological interconnectedness. Despite the visible shift in tone within dominant advice literature for women, significant overlaps remained between the two models, reflecting the dynamic negotiations between agency and coercion. Although the 1930s and communist models appear incompatible, both relate closely to the Nazi *Gretchen* and the Fascist "new Italian woman," which were informed by nationalist traditionalism. In Romania's case, reluctance to impose the German interpretation led to Italy becoming the paragon of beauty, with health and fashion as expressions of national identity. Meanwhile, women in uniform in

and Compendium of American and English Jurisprudence (Chicago: T.H. Flood and Company, Law Publishers, 1890), 542.

6 Yang Shen, *Beyond Tears and Laughter: Gender, Migration, and the Service Sector in China* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2019), 30–2.

7 For an exploration of the flapper in a Romanian American context, see Andraș, *"Garçonne*, but Make Her Flapper. Using American Femininity Models to Re-Fashion the Romanian 'Modern Girl,'" in *Creative Negotiations. Romania – America 1920–1940*, eds Sonia Andraș and Roxana Mihaly (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2023), 138–65.

8 For an exploration of the expansion-contraction spectrum in gendered discourse in 1930s Romania, see Andraș, "From Monitorul Oficial to Calea Victoriei: Decoding 1930s Bucharest through Women's Fashion," *Journal of Romanian Studies*, 5, no. 1 (25 April 2023): 27–54, https://doi.org/10.3828/jrns.2023.3.

militarized contexts became a common sight in women's glossy magazines as early as 1939. As Eugenia Paulicelli contended, in Italy, the folk element blended with military uniforms as "two unmatchable ambivalent souls," utilizing fashion to create a so-called national, "rational style."[9] This phenomenon likely occurred as Fascist Italy was among the first European regimes to recognize the importance of modern communication in propaganda.[10]

As a spectrum with an inherent quality of inclusion and a panoramic perspective, agency–coercion embraces the dynamics of everything in, around and in-between. For the "modern girl" ideal, Princess Marthe Bibesco's *Noblesse de Robe* offers a narrative of agency.[11] As a woman articulating her firsthand experiences and championing elegance, she introduced early fashion theory concepts while emphasizing the significance and power of style. For the 'new woman' ideal, Aurel Voina's 1938 book *Îngrijirea tenului* [Skincare] belonged to a three-volume advice literature series for women.[12] It symbolizes coercion by ideologizing and politicizing beauty as cosmetology. As Voina announced in its introduction, the next volume would address hair hygiene and aesthetics, suggesting ideas of physical and racial purity, while the final volume would explore the relationship between silhouette and beauty.[13] This choice of words reflected Voina's background as a Rockefeller fellow, venerologist, and eugenicist.

This comparative project builds upon established research on fascist movements in interwar Romania,[14] Italian fascist propaganda cinema in interwar Romania,[15] women and fascism,[16] fashion and fascism,[17] eugenics and modernization,[18] eugenics and modernism[19], and eugenics in Central and Eastern Europe.[20] It also adds the coercion–agency spectrum to the literature

9 Eugenia Paulicelli, *Fashion Under Fascism* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 19–20.
10 Georgiana Țăranu, "Mussolini on the Screen: Fascist Italy's Propaganda Films in Interwar Romania," *Historical Yearbook*, 13, no. XIII (2016): 99.
11 Marthe Bibesco, *Noblesse de Robe* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1928).
12 Aurel Voina, *Îngrijirea tenului* [Skincare] (Bucharest: Cugetarea—Georgescu Delafras, 1938).
13 Voina, *Îngrijirea tenului* [Skincare], 5–6.
14 Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).
15 Țăranu, "Mussolini on the Screen," 99–106.
16 Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
17 Paulicelli, *Fashion Under Fascism*.
18 Maria Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002).
19 Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
20 Turda, *The History of East-Central European Eugenics, 1900–1945: Sources and Commentaries* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

on life and society in interwar Bucharest,[21] gender and modernism,[22] and to its connection with the Bucharest Jewish Avant-Garde.[23] It draws on the larger questions of design and advice literature,[24] the interwar European relationship between the press and popular culture,[25] the cultural history of Parisian fashion,[26] and fashion and politics.[27] This paper contributes to Romanian and fashion studies by analyzing *Îngrijirea tenului* and *Noblesse de Robe* as key texts for understanding the fluid debate on women's physical and symbolic perfection. It contextualizes negotiations on the agency–coercion spectrum through examples from advice literature, music, and film to highlight the complexities of women's experiences, demonstrating how gendered discourse intertwines cultural, scientific, and spiritual values.

While both *Noblesse de Robe* and *Îngrijirea tenului* addressed a female audience, Bibesco's work was aimed at an international *Vogue* readership, whereas Voina's book targeted only Romanian women. Bibesco wrote from within the fashion world, offering veiled tales and an insider's understanding, drawing upon her knowledge of fashion theory and experience as an active participant in haute couture. Voina wrote from an external, patriarchal perspective marked by a sense of superiority, congruent with his later full adherence to the Iron Guard, the extreme-right-wing militant Legion of the Archangel Michael, and his active political involvement during the National Legionary State (1940–1941).[28] This may also explain the differences in dissemination. *Noblesse de Robe* addressed a global audience, mainly composed of cultured, refined readers able to appreciate its literary, political, and cultural nuances. *Îngrijirea tenului* circulated with extensive publicity in Romania.

Regarding depictions of women, Bibesco focused on the real, modern, elegant, and worldly woman, interested in high fashion. Voina, on the other hand, described an archetypal, abstract woman, framing femininity as an ideological construct. Bibesco discussed how to become a Parisienne, an emancipated, modern, cultured, stylish, and assertive woman. Voina offered guidance on how to become the perfect woman as a social tool, with beauty understood

21 Ioana Pârvulescu, *Întoarcere în Bucureştiul interbelic* [Return to Interwar Bucharest] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007).

22 Bucur, *Gendering Modernism: A Historical Reappraisal of the Canon* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

23 Alexandra Chiriac, *Performing Modernism: A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest*, *Performing Modernism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110765687.

24 Lees-Maffei, "From Service to Self-Service," 187–206.

25 Newman and Houlbrook, *The Press and Popular Culture in Interwar Europe*.

26 Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2017).

27 Djurdja Bartlett, *Fashion and Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019).

28 Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization*, 40.

in utilitarian terms. The models used by each author further highlighted their distinct approaches. Bibesco elevated the Parisienne as a fashion creator and icon, while Voina's advice was rooted in local patriarchal contexts and was informed by a misogynistic, eugenics-influenced ideology. For Bibesco, fashion was central to a woman's life and served as a path to emancipation. Voina placed fashion in a secondary role, ideologized as a means of reinforcing patriarchal structures. Bibesco paired fashion with notions of refinement, whereas Voina linked it with health. Both books belonged to the category of advice literature, offering instructions and rules for women, but while Bibesco framed these culturally, Voina's framework was ideological.

The agency–coercion theme can be illustrated through songs popular in interwar Romania that reflect gender dynamics. The first notable piece is Carlos Gardel's *Por una cabeza*, which symbolizes the construction of ideal femininity. The Romanian translation of the Argentinian tango *Zaraza* reinforces the motif of the dangerous woman. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* is based upon the metaphor of smoke obscuring vision to describe love, while *As Time Goes By* explores recurring themes found in literature aimed at women. This playlist provides a synesthetic glimpse into ongoing negotiations around the extremes of agency and coercion in evolving interpretations of gender identity. When played alongside advice literature, this playlist helps the twenty-first-century reader understand the contradictions of interwar-era messaging.[29] These songs contributed to the global dissemination of American perspectives on modernity, which women, particularly in the so-called "Little Paris" urban spaces, enthusiastically adopted through their fashion, behavior, and leisure activities.[30]

Before conducting a comparative analysis of *Îngrijirea tenului* and *Noblesse de Robe*, it is essential to first contextualize them within the interwar literature aimed at women.

From *esprit parisien* to eugenic beauty

In the interwar global publishing world, topics appealing to female audiences were often regarded as less significant than what was known as "grand culture," predominantly associated with men, with a few notable exceptions. Women's

29 See the accompanying playlist created for this paper, on Spotify (audio) "Negotiating Women's Bodies Playlist," created 3 May 2025. https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1O3OZy3VzSyZlWCXQ8tDdj?si=87d3b9df2a994045 and YouTube (audio and video) created 3 May 2025, https://youtu.be/SJ1aTPM-dyE?si=kFbep7daCsLUHCjS, both accessed 10 October 2025.

30 Andraș, *The Women of 'Little Paris,'* 9.

literature is not a perfect synonym for literature aimed at a female audience, regardless of the author's gender identity. On the modern girl side of the spectrum, Bibesco wove an intricate narrative at the intersection of fashion and literature.

Noblesse de Robe celebrates Parisian fashion by highlighting the *esprit parisien* (Parisian spirit) embodied by the Parisienne. It positions the city as a global cultural center, emphasizing that women can embody the essence of a *Parisienne* regardless of ethnic or national background through style and attitude.[31] The book was published in 1928 as a collection of essays dedicated to notable "characters" in the Parisian fashion world, veiled under pseudonyms. The titles were published throughout 1927 as a monthly series of articles in *Vogue Paris*, totaling six. It may be less recognized than Bibesco's other works. Still, it offers unique insights into Parisian fashion and elegance, how women become Parisiennes, and the artistry and intelligence of Parisian couturières, blending literary and fashion analysis and showing how *esprit parisien* acts as a cultural force while disguising real figures under common names for layered commentary on style and identity.

Despite the lack of explicit signs that the essays are framed as advice literature, their original *Vogue* creation was intended as such. The initial articles were created to align with the mission and publishing standards of *Vogue*'s parent company, Condé Nast. They were commissioned as part of a wider series of monthly essays that had previously included fellow Romanian-French writer Anna de Noailles and French writer Colette. The essays were to be edited in accordance with *Vogue Paris*'s publishing standards, requiring articles of approximately 1,200 words with a human interest and instructional tone for women. The parent company, Condé Nast, retained distribution and reproduction rights and reinforced *Vogue*'s collective editorial authority. The 12 articles were thus shaped as much by the *Vogue* editorial collective as by their authors, who agreed to the same contractual terms.[32] Bibesco added her own flavors, even within the fixed framing of *Vogue*'s advice literature style.

The book's French press highlights the integration of foreigners into French cultural identity, frequently noting her status as a French writer of Romanian

31 Agnès Rocamora, "Paris, Capitale de La Mode: Representing the Fashion City in the Media," in *Fashion's World Cities*, eds Christopher Breward and David Gilbert (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 48–50. For a broader Romanian context connected to Sonia Delaunay, see Andraș, "Fashioning Simultaneous Migrations: Sonia Delaunay and Inter-War Romanian Connections," *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*, 13, no. 2 (19 December 2022): 229–53, https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb_00047_1.

32 Andraș, "Fashioning a Debate: Fashion, Gender and Literature in *Noblesse de Robe* by Marthe Bibesco in Context," *Revue Roumaine d'Histoire de l'Art. Série Beaux-Arts*, LXI/2024 (7 March 2025): 44.

heritage. With Paris at its heart, the modern fashion system became a hub for creative exchanges among artists and textile professionals.[33] The global reception was often interlinked with Bibesco's Romanian roots, highlighting her unique position as Parisienne. The French press recognized Bibesco as a significant figure in Parisian culture and literature, but did not accord her the same courtesy in her writings on fashion. Yet she meticulously documented the extensive press coverage of *Noblesse de Robe* in a notebook preserved at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin,[34] reflecting her strong affinity for the book, and it is particularly relevant today as her profile has risen significantly in the years following the fiftieth anniversary of her passing.[35]

While the book's relationship to fashion and Bibesco's literary contributions were not widely discussed at the time of its release, it was initially popular before later disappearing into obscurity in biographical and bibliographical accounts. For a twenty-first-century reader, especially in its Grasset iteration, *Noblesse de Robe* can bridge a temporal gap of knowledge. Throughout the book, Bibesco urged women to embrace individuality, to resist borrowed identities, to see fashion as a science of taste that balances uniqueness with social belonging, and to cultivate originality. She treated fashion as a discipline rooted in confidence, study, and renunciation, while genuine elegance, read as "nobility," was found in simplicity and self-assurance, rather than extravagance.[36] Nobility, however, was distinct from Gardel's "noble steed." It is not a birthright. It is a state to be earned and maintained. Bibesco warned against copying others' clothes and explained that the desire for "the already worn," read as déjà vu, often masked a longing to become someone else.[37] Fashion was to be an intelligent pursuit that requires perseverance and experimentation, in contrast to the futility of repetition.[38]

Beyond the realms of the modern girl and the new woman, Romania was no exception to the perceptual gap between women's literary writing and

33 See Sophie Kurkdjian, "Paris as the Capital of Fashion, 1858–1939: An Inquiry," *Fashion Theory*, 24, no. 3 (April 2020): 371–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2020.1732022.

34 Bibesco, "Lettres et coupures de presse. *Noblesse de Robe*" (Box: Clippings, including bound volume of articles relating to *Noblesse de robe*, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, USA, 1929), Box 348-349, Harry Ransom Center, https://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findingAid.cfm?eadid=00372, accessed 10 October 2025.

35 agerpres.ro, "DOCUMENTAR: 50 de ani de la moartea principesei şi scriitoarei Martha Bibescu (28 noiembrie)," *Agerpress*, 23 November 2023, https://agerpres.ro/documentare/2023/11/23/documentar-50-de-ani-de-la-moartea-principesei-si-scriitoarei-martha-bibescu-28-noiembrie--1210766, accessed 10 October 2025.

36 Bibesco, *Noblesse de Robe*, 9–18 (French Dolls of Fashion, Mademoiselle); 'Gabrielle ou le génie de l'accessoire' 143–51; 'Tote, l'illustre couturière' 195–205. Unless specified, for clarity, this paper will cite the pages of the book chapters.

37 Bibesco, *Noblesse de Robe*, 'Odette ou la robe d'autrui ne désireras,' 117–26.

38 Bibesco, *Noblesse de Robe*, 'La Mode pensée: selon Antoinette,' 91–102.

advice literature aimed at women. For instance, despite women's numerous and enthusiastic involvement in extreme-right-wing militant movements, their heroic, moral and intellectual capabilities and achievements were underscored or downright ignored.[39] This gendered differentiation extended to the broader artistic landscape, as seen in a moralistic appreciation of truth-telling that favored male over female body depictions.[40] Even in areas perceived as feminine interests, such as beauty, it took a man to theorize and teach it. Voina defined beauty as the fundamental driving force of life, cultivated through scientific principles, with cosmetology as the science of beauty. *Îngrijirea tenului* was integrated into his larger theoretical, ideological, and practical philosophy, examining both hygienic and aesthetic perspectives while addressing the anatomical aspects relevant to cosmetology.[41] The "noble steed" in *Por una cabeza* indeed represents a genetic quality, despite its volatility if mismanaged. By the time the book was published, Voina had already established himself as a key figure in Romania's eugenic structures, promoting ideas and measures to curtail and prevent what was perceived as hereditary degeneration.[42] According to Marius Turda, Romanian eugenicists worked towards a program of "biological regeneration," promoting a reciprocal relationship between individuals and the so-called "dominant racial community."[43] Women's perceived interest in fashion and beauty was seen as both an innate trait and anathema to genuine creativity. Before analyzing the relationship between *Îngrijirea tenului* and *Noblesse de Robe*, it is crucial to evaluate the impact of each book in Romania as contrasting facets of advice literature directed at women.

Noblesse de Robe can be set apart from Marthe Bibesco's other works from its inception. She introduced the established French phrase *Noblesse de Robe* to the twentieth century and the fashion industry as both tangible and metaphorical, reflecting fashion's intricate interaction with culture and industry, from conception, craft, and creation to dissemination and consumption. Its original meaning refers to a noble title associated with a judicial or administrative role in the Ancien Régime, unlike the "noblesse d'épée" of feudal military service. Because "robe" can be translated as either "robe" or "dress," and nobility can refer to social status or reputation, the title illustrates the behavioral and aesthetic qualities embodied by the Parisienne. Although Bibesco's feminism

39 Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth*, 46.
40 Chiriac, *Performing Modernism*, 122–3.
41 Voina, *Îngrijirea tenului* [*Skincare*], 5–6.
42 Turda, "Romania. Overview," in *The History of East-Central European Eugenics*, ed. Marius Turda, 279.
43 Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics*, 99.

could seem elitist, Ulrich Lemann observed that she leveraged her social position to examine social and gender roles without causing division, doing so naturally and without relying on academic qualifications.[44] Flipping the coin to coercion, interwar women on both sides of the Atlantic faced significant prejudice, even with proper academic credentials. A notable example is the disparity in recognition, attention, and Rockefeller Foundation support between Voina and another certified Romanian female doctor referred to in her fellowship card as "Miss Popa" (although her title was later corrected to "Dr," without any other follow-up). Unlike Voina, who held a medical degree, "Miss Popa" was only recognized for her nursing studies in the USA.[45]

Despite the separation between the modern girl and the new woman, and the two decades of interwar Romania, *Îngrijirea tenului* likely had a much longer gestation period than the entirety of the *Noblesse de Robe* project, which could be traced from around 1926 to the early 1930s. But Voina's larger body of work beyond *Îngrijirea tenului* extended well into the previous decade. Since the early 1920s, Voina actively participated in the Romanian eugenic movement, working in Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest. He served as the secretary of the Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People (ASTRA) Association,[46] which included a eugenics and biopolitical section since 1927.[47] He also wrote for the magazine *Societatea de mâine* [Tomorrow's Society] as a permanent contributor and pursued his Rockefeller fellowship in 1926,[48] leading to the publication of *Prostituția si boalele venerice* in Romania [Prostitution and Venereal Diseases in Romania], which emphasized hygiene and eugenics as vital for national renewal and scientific progress.[49] Voina was mainly known to women as an advice literature author. He also spread his ideas through lectures and conferences, drawing from his work in cosmetology, eugenics, medicine, and supposed fashion expertise.

Even if not explicitly mentioned, eugenics blended with the emerging pseudo-scientific determination of beauty parameters. In a 1931 lecture on the

44 Ulrich Lehmann, "Introduction to Excerpts from *Noblesse de Robe*," *Art in Translation*, 7, no. 2 (4 May 2015): 245, https://doi.org/10.1080/17561310.2015.1038906.

45 Andraș, *The Women of 'Little Paris,'* 128–9.

46 Turda, "Romania. Overview," 276.

47 Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics*, 74.

48 *Dr. Aurel Voina (Romania) - IHD, 1917–1970s*. The Rockefeller Foundation records; Fellowships, RG 10; Fellowship Cards, SG 10.2; Nursing Travel Grants Since 1930, Series 31; Romania; Rockefeller Archive Center, n.d., https://dimes.rockarch.org/objects/EUR4dEQw644DMTM2PEb62x/view, accessed 10 October 2025.

49 Voina, *Prostituția Și Boalele Venerice in Romania* [Prostitution and Venereal Diseases in Romania] (Bucharest: F. Göbl and Sons Royal Court, 1930).

cult of beauty, Voina argued that modern medical sciences should investigate the relationship between physical beauty and internal organ function, emphasizing the connection between physique and health, and referring to physical education, orthopedics, or sexology. Voina noted the importance of *calipedia*, the science of achieving human physical perfection across aesthetic dimensions.[50] Voina employed a similar approach in *Îngrijirea tenului* when defining cosmetology as a systematic and rational beautification science distinct from traditional medicine, formed by combining the Ancient Greek *kosmeo* (to adorn) and *kosmesis* (adornment). He stated that "cosmetic" means both functional and decorative, with a focus on chemistry. He believed cosmetics needed a scientific approach to reduce risks posed by untrained professionals, since beautification often focused on sensual traits.[51] While Bibesco described nobility as gained and expressed through garments, Voina's notion of cosmetics adhered to academic rigor, associating aesthetics with health and, if reading the fine print, purity in its darkest sense. A commonality between the two works lies in their critique of choices driven by emotion, like giving in to the temptation to gamble on a horse. For both, "nobility" was the result of effort and thought.

Bibesco framed her fashion advice by linking dress to identity, intellect, and social power, without ignoring the pressures of conformity. She showed how fashion's cyclical return allowed women to reinvent themselves daily without equating change with aging,[52] and how perseverance and scientific study transformed fashion into a discipline of intelligence and experimentation.[53] Bibesco's readers understood that imitation was anathema to the pursuit of uniqueness, portraying weakness as borrowing styles from others engaged in empty repetition.[54] Indeed, uniqueness was the essence of good taste, requiring study, practice, and renunciation, while imitation was a social mechanism that blurred individuality and reinforced conformity. As fashion was a timeless philosophy that transcended styles and generations, Bibesco urged women to maintain dignity and intellectual acuity even amid austerity.[55]

Îngrijirea tenului marked the Romanian beauty discourse and practices during the late 1930s, at the border between academic writing, popular science, and advice literature. From its first edition in the summer of 1936 until the publication of a new guide combining skincare and haircare, Romanian women

50 "Cultul frumuseții. Conferința d-lui dr. Aurel Voina la Brașov" [Cult of Beauty. Dr. Aurel Voina's Conference in Brașov], *Dimineața*, 20 December 1931, 12.
51 Voina, *Îngrijirea tenului* [Skincare], 31–2.
52 Bibesco, *Noblesse de Robe*, 'Cora ou la diversité,' 33–40.
53 Bibesco, 'La Mode pensée.'
54 Bibesco, 'Odette.'
55 Bibesco, '*Noblesse de Robe*.'

were widely encouraged to see it as the epitome of advice literature. Throughout July 1936, an advertisement framed by a thick rectangle highlighting its "resounding success" circulated throughout the Romanian press. The text emphasized the public's need for a book organizing beauty science, especially as there were frequent cases of individuals making irreversible mistakes with their skincare based on personal experience, indicating the book had quickly become an essential guide for women of all ages who valued their natural beauty just a few months after its first publication.[56] Another version of the advertisement presented the book simply as "the success of the day."[57] The text is a reiteration of the original late-June advertisements for Voina's new book.[58] The rapid success of Voina's manual can be attributed to a perfect storm of personal, social, cultural, and ideological factors, as a doctor, Rockefeller fellow, eugenicist, theorist, politician, and eventually lawmaker. The author's professional reputation, and likely his gender, significantly contributed to its broad, almost instant appeal. Despite ongoing assertions of scientific expertise and significant press and radio coverage, its popularity was attributed mainly to female readers. During a period when beauty and, to some extent, fashion were primarily considered women's concerns, the manual received praise in conservative and even far-right circles. This indicated a belief that it took a man, specifically, a doctor and eugenicist, to instruct women on how to be beautiful.

On the other side of the spectrum, Bibesco highlighted creative authority as professional conscience and intellectual discipline, elevating craft into a science of refinement.[59] She depicted fashion houses as aristocratic structures governing with responsibility, where originality and exclusivity distinguished genuine creators from imitators. The princess traced the historical influence of French fashion through symbolic agents who peacefully conquered England using Parisian models, showcasing fashion's impact on politics and culture. These Dolls of Fashion, as Bibesco referred to them in English and capital letters, originated in France during the seventeenth century. They were sent across the channel every three months, their arrival temporarily halting the ongoing naval hostilities at the time between Louis XIV and William of Orange. Bibesco explained that English merchants eagerly distributed these dolls to

56 "Succesul răsunător al lucrării *Îngrijirea tenului* de Docent Dr. Aurel Voina" [The Resounding Success of the Work 'Skincare' by Dr. Aurel Voina], *Curentul*, 11 July 1936, 2; 20 July 1936, 2; *Universul*, 25 July 1936, 3.

57 "Succesul zilei îl constituie *Îngrijirea tenului* de Docent Dr. Aurel Voina" [The Success of the Day is 'Skincare' by Dr. Aurel Voina], *Curentul*, 15 July 1936, 2.

58 "Informațiuni," *Rampa*, 19 June 1936, 3; "*Îngrijirea tenului* de Docent Dr. Aurel Voina" ['Skincare' by Associate Professor Dr. Aurel Voina], *Curentul*, 21 June 1936, 2.

59 Bibesco, *Noblesse de Robe*, 'Fabienne, ou la conscience profesionnelle,' 21–30.

introduce Parisian fashion trends nationwide, embodying originality and exclusivity. Fashion thus played a significant role beyond mere adornment, influencing international relations, cultural status, and women's identities. She continued by presenting the Parisian atelier of a formidable couturiere (Coco "Mademoiselle" Chanel) as a site of technical prowess, creativity, and national pride, reinforcing fashion's cultural authority and its demands for personal discipline.[60] Voina's ideological stance, however, veered towards the darker side of extreme-right-wing thought.

Despite beautification being traditionally regarded as a feminine prerogative, reviews consistently claimed that women alone were incapable of applying or even understanding the basics of health and beauty. In the late 1930s, Voina continued lecturing on beauty and, somewhat unexpectedly, fashion. One of his most notable presentations on fashion and health occurred at Dalles Hall in central Bucharest, receiving significant acclaim and media attention.[61] He applied these philosophies as a doctor and cosmetologist, and provided consultations for dermatological diseases and skin care in Bucharest's Old Town in the mid-to-late 1930s, including book promotion activities. His identity likely ensured that the manual avoided the ridicule, superiority, dismissal, and outright revulsion faced by *Noblesse de Robe* in its modest Romanian and broader international reception. By the dawn of the 1940s, Voina made his ideological stance clear as rhetoric grew increasingly militant, and he clarified his views on population eugenics in his later works. In the third edition of his hygiene manual for eighth-grade students, published with the full approval of the Ministry of National Culture and Faiths, Voina emphasized that a citizen's physical, intellectual, and moral health represents the trinity crucial to a nation's future. Hygienic practices and medical interventions upheld a nation's health. He characterized hygienic methods as preventive and suitable for everyone, unlike corrective medical methods requiring proper qualifications, and hence everyone was responsible for leading a hygienic life. He believed an enlightened citizen and "true" Romanian needed to understand that no individual could thrive in isolation and should think and act with and for the collective. He deemed ethics crucial for society because of its humanitarian nature and emphasis on high moral standards and public health.[62] While *Îngrijirea tenului* epitomized Voina's

60 Bibesco, *Noblesse de Robe*.

61 Rep., "Modă și sănătate. Conferința D-lui docent Dr. Aurel Voina la Dalles"[Fashion and Health. Lecture by Dr. Aurel Voina at Dalles], *Jurnalul Doamnei*, 1 December 1938, 27.

62 Voina, *Igiena—pentru clasa a VIII-a secundară de băieți și fete* [Hygiene—for 8th Grade Secondary Boys and Girls], 3rd ed. (Bucharest: Cugetarea—Georgescu Delafras, 1941), 3–4.

ideological stance, it also explained his activities and subsequent trajectory during interwar Romania's era and into the Second World War.

But fashion and especially beauty shared a deeper, more tenebrous history with traditional gendered rituals, medicine, and eugenics. The interwar penchant for aesthetic hierarchies illustrates a presumably new and scientifically sound twentieth-century rephrasing of feminine beauty, including beauty pageants.[63] By the time the manual was published in the second half of the 1930s, Voina was already a well-known voice in eugenic and medical circles. The manual was even praised for clearing the "confusion" regarding women's beautification.[64] Perhaps precisely because the book was penned by a man, a doctor with an active presence and professional respectability, the book's topic—cosmetics—was treated as a serious subject. In the Cluj-Napoca-based nationalist daily *Patria*, a review by Dr Gabriel Cotul described the book as long-awaited and believed it achieved significant aesthetic value by merging a new artistic movement with hygienic education focused on living beings. He described it as a showcase of the dual nature of beauty and utility, emphasizing the connection between aesthetics and ethics. For Cotul, despite worsening living conditions, beautification remained essential when pursuing *calipedia* scientifically, combining aesthetics and biology.[65] The continual usage of "calipedia" indicates the persistence of Voina's terminology and theoretical framing, leading to *Îngrijirea tenului* as both a practical manual and a scientific treatise, framed as advice literature for women. Its liminal nature between theoretical and popular writing is based on the premise that women were reluctant or unable to engage with traditional academic and scientific texts. To understand this dynamic, it is necessary to outline how advice literature, propaganda, and ideology intersect in Voina's broader activities.

Voina's efforts transcended the realms of medicine and policy. For instance, in the spring of 1924, he supported an iteration of the 1920 play *Le mortel baiser* [The Deadly Kiss] by Quebecois actor, writer, and director Paul Gury to raise awareness of the ongoing plight of venereal diseases, especially after the First World War.[66] The play's main song, published separately as a sheet booklet with lyrics written by Gury, serves as a warning to everyone involved. It warns young

63 Beverly Stoeltje, "The Snake Charmer Queen: Ritual, Competition and Signification in American Festival," in *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage. Gender, Contests, Power*, eds Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 18.

64 Gheorghe Corneanu, "*Îngrijirea tenului* de Dr. Docent Aurel Voina. Editura 'Cugetarea'" [Skincare by Lecturer Dr. Aurel Voina. Publisher Cugetarea], *Dimineața*, 8 August 1936, 10.

65 Gabriel Cotul, "*Îngrijirea tenului* de: Docent dr. Aurel Voina. Editura 'Cugetarea' București – 268 p." [Skincare by Lecturer Dr. Aurel Voina. Publisher Cugetarea Bucharest], *Patria*, 18 July 1936, 2.

66 Referenced as Le Gouriadec.

men to be cautious of deceptive women whose charm can lead to misfortune. It advises young girls to be wary of charming boys since danger often hides behind sweet words. Finally, it urges "negligent and guilty" parents to help their children recognize the threats they face, stressing the importance of protecting them from lasting harm by providing timely warnings. The refrain urges young people to avoid dangerous relationships and only seek true love.[67] The opening was reported in the Cluj-Napoca daily Înfrățirea, led by traditionalist journalist and literary critic Dumitru Tomescu. The reviewer, signing as "b," noted that Voina's support was instrumental to the play's realization. The review highlighted the Great War as crucial in revealing the dangers of venereal diseases among soldiers, referred to as "the peasants." Their extensive travels abroad prompted the medical community to strengthen efforts to establish prophylaxis societies to address this health threat.[68]

This collaboration between the worlds of dramatic performance and medicine, extending in this context to eugenics and biopolitics, emphasizes the interconnectedness of fields and aspects of life often viewed as incompatible. Fashion has capitalized on these connections as a practice of modernity, creating an interdisciplinary system encompassing all aspects, from conceptualization and manufacturing to dissemination and interpretation. Advice literature functions like a double-edged sword. Depending on their position on the agency–coercion spectrum, instructional texts can empower or restrict their target audience. Examining *Noblesse de Robe* and *Îngrijirea tenului* as endpoints provides a broader and more nuanced understanding of women's identities in interwar Romania. In this context, *Por una cabeza* becomes a cautionary tale, where beauty and fashion are matters of careful thought and sustained effort.

Por una cabeza: crafting models

In the second half of the 1930s, Carlos Gardel's tango *Por una cabeza*, with lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera,[69] dominated dance floors worldwide, including in Bucharest,

67 Charles Aime, Paul Gury, and Cercy, *Le Mortel Baiser*, Vocal Popular Sheet Music Collection, Score 1143 (Lowell, Mass: E. L. Turcot, 1920), https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mmb-vp/1143, accessed 10 October 2025.

68 b., "'SĂRUTUL MORȚII.' Piesă in 4 acte de Gouriadec, localizată de dr. Aurel Voina" ['THE KISS OF DEATH.' Play in 4 acts by Gouriadec, localized by Dr. Aurel Voina], *Înfrățirea*, 12 April 1924, 3.

69 IMSLP, "Por Una Cabeza [For a Head] (Gardel, Carlos)," *International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP) / Petrucci Music Library*, 25 August 2018, https://imslp.org/wiki/Por_una_Cabeza_%28Gardel,_Carlos%29, accessed 10 October 2025.

where tango reigned supreme, whether danced at events or enjoyed through radio broadcasts in public and private spaces, as well as through records and piano scores played in the home.[70] Carlos Gardel had become so well known to the Romanian public that the Bucharest magazine Rampa, dedicated to theatre, music and literature, published an article in early July 1935 announcing that "The King of Tango has Died in a Plane Crash." The article, dedicated to his "era of glory," noted that he was celebrated worldwide as a French-born cabaret singer who became an Argentine tango icon, popularizing the genre with his romantic performances, and whose death was mourned worldwide.[71] The article did not specifically mention *Por una cabeza* among his most famous titles. The same publication included a summary of an interview with an unnamed Parisian reporter by Gardel's mother, emphasizing his French heritage.[72] Unlike Bibesco, Gardel may have been born in France, but he was remembered as an Argentinian.

Por una cabeza opens with a racehorse stumbling just before the finish line, reminding the rider to think of his brother and the dangers of gambling. This close race symbolizes a compulsive gambler's struggles, which the song equates with his attraction to women, particularly the dejection he experiences when he is deceived or rejected.[73] The tango's popularity in the 1930s, unlike the more-frequently mentioned *Adios muchachos*, was likely overshadowed by the news that the accident claimed 17 lives, including Gardel and La Pera.[74] The tango was rediscovered in the early 1990s through two remarkable instrumental versions etched into cinematic history, in Martin Brest's *Scent of a Woman* (1992) and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), highlighting its profound cultural and historical resonance, particularly its intrinsic connection to the era leading up to and during the Second World War.

While the tango does not explicitly address women's roles in social or personal relationships, it subtly hints at a man's compulsive behavior and how

70 Pârvulescu, *Întoarcere în Bucureştiul interbelic* [Return to interwar Bucharest], 196–7.

71 "Regele tangoului a murit într'un accident de avion. Carlos Gardel şi epoca sa de glorie" [The king of tango died in a plane crash. Carlos Gardel and his era of glory], *Rampa*, 4 July 1935, 4.

72 "'Viaţa lui Carlos Gardel evocată de mama sa" [The Life of Carlos Gardel As Recounted by His Mother], *Rampa*, 27 July 1935, 4.

73 Maria Espinola et al., "Portrayals of Romantic Deception to the Masses: An Analysis of Classic and Contemporary Arts, Modern Technologies, and Empirical Literature," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication*, ed. Tony Docan-Morgan (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 877–95, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96334-1_45. *Scent of a Woman*. Directed by Martin Brest (Universal Pictures, City Light Films, 1993), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0105323/, accessed 10 October 2025. *Schindler's List*. Directed by Steven Spielberg (Universal Pictures, Amblin Entertainment, 1994), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108052/, accessed 10 October 2025.

74 "Ciocnirea a două aeroplane –17 morţi–" [Two Airplanes Crash–17 dead], *Lupta*, 26 June 1935, 6. "Groaznic accident de avion în America" [Horrific Airplane Accident in America], *Curentul* (Bucharest), 27 June 1935, 11.

it influences his interactions with women. Although the comparison likely pertains to the horse-rider duo in the race rather than the purebred horse alone, the connection between the song's protagonist and the realm of horse racing is figuratively likened to love relationships, warning against the risks women may pose to well-meaning but infatuated men. This concept aligns with the figure of the glamorous diva, particularly the vamp, which can be traced to the 1931 Romanian translation of the 1929 Argentine tango *Zaraza* by Benjamin Tagle Lara. The original version was already known in Romania in 1930. Its popularity assured its inclusion in the late 1931 and early 1932 "Columbia concert" program on the daily Cuvântul's radio channel.[75] By March 1932, the Romanian translation had become the definitive version, a staple of interwar Bucharest radio musical programming.[76] It even became a prime example in conservative, nationalistic critiques of how national music was replaced by foreign melodies and styles, reproduced across social strata without discernment.[77] The Romanian version, with lyrics by Romanian-Israeli poet and humorist Ion Pribeagu, was performed by tenor and tango-romance singer Cristian Vasile.[78] Still celebrated in Romania today, the song conveys the main character's deep longing for Zaraza, whose description includes another animal reference, this time a "feline snake." In the chorus, the main character mentions Zaraza's former lovers and admirers, expressing his longing for her presence and affection, as well as his readiness for complete self-sacrifice.

Although some elements from both original lyrics provide circumstantial evidence of lyrical misogyny, they also reflect a prevailing mindset about gender roles in interwar society, Romania included. The lyrics of both tangos, which were widely known, sung, and recited throughout interwar Bucharest, offer a nuanced perspective on the complexities of gender dynamics and the language surrounding men's relationships with women, serving as a fitting soundtrack for analyzing the spectrum of agency and coercion.

75 "Audițiile 'Cuvântul'" ['Cuvântul (The Word)' Auditions], *Cuvântul*, 26 November 1931, 7; 13 December 1931, 2; 4 January 1932, 7.

76 Ioan Massoff, "Seară de misticism..." [Evening of Mysticism], *Rampa*, 1.

77 Lucrezzia Karr, "Puterea cântecului asupra mulțimii" [The Power of Song on the Masses], *Îndreptarea*, 15 June 1932, 2. Liviu Rusu, "Cronica muzicală. Grija de cântările bisericii" [Musical Chronicle. Care of Church Songs], *Glasul Bucovinei*, 30 August 1932, 2–3.

78 Sonia Vass, "Revisiting the Argentine Tango: From the 'Paris of South America' to the Interwar Bucharest," *Confluențe. Texts and Contexts Reloaded*, no. 1 (2014): 115–7.

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: gendering the interwar timeline

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes is one of the enduring musical numbers from the successful musical *Roberta*,[79] based on Alice Duer Miller's 1933 novel *Gowns by Roberta*. For its 1933–1934 Broadway musical adaptation by Jerome Kern and Otto Harbach, the title was shortened to *Roberta* and was staged by Max Gordon at the New Amsterdam Theatre.[80] The Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) film adaptation used the musical version as its inspiration.[81] The movie premiered in Bucharest around seven months after its original release, shown initially at the Capitol and Roxy cinemas in central Bucharest, followed by American and Orfeu cinemas, throughout late 1936 and early 1937. Enthusiastic Romanian film reviews and the number of movie theaters screening the film demonstrate its success in late-1930s Bucharest.[82] The movie notably starred Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, alongside Irene Dunne, John Kent, and Helen Westley. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* was one of the few songs from the original Broadway play adapted to cinema. Unlike the dangerous beauties captivating the hearts and minds of love gamblers or gathered under the name Zaraza in interwar Bucharest, this song does not blame a man's suffering solely on the woman. Instead, it was written as a sorrowful love song about loss and regret, which both men and women could perform. The singer conveyed true love despite warnings that it can be blinding, as smoke could cover the eyes when the heart is ablaze.[83] While not entirely synonymous with ideologically motivated coercion, the concept can be applied to the logic and practices of propaganda, particularly on the coercive end of the agency–coercion spectrum. This phrase illustrates a person's susceptibility to deception and manipulation due to a naive, unaware, or intentional willingness to comply. Both ends of the spectrum promote a specific style of authenticity for women, which can imply artifice when one adopts a desirable persona. This is especially relevant when discussing coercion, as seemingly well-intentioned guidance can often be misleading. Messages conveyed by figures like Voina can function like smoke in the eyes, obscuring

79 Arlene Croce, *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book* (London: W.H. Allen, 1972), 24.

80 Alice Duer Miller, *Gowns by Roberta* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1933).

81 *Roberta*, Directed by William A. Seiter (RKO Radio Pictures, 1935).

82 See Andraș, "Roberta at the Capitol and Roxy: Fashion, Cinema, and Modernity in Interwar Bucharest," *Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane "Gheorghe Șincai" al Academiei Române*, 26 (1 December 2023): 163–85, https://www.doi.org/10.59277/ICSUGh.Sincai.26.11.

83 Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes Sheet Music* (New York: T.B. Harms Company, 1933). National Museum of American History. ID and Catalog Number: 1986.0315.09. Record ID: nmah_682042. https://n2t.net/ark:/65665/ng49ca746a4-ec83-704b-e053-15f76fa0b4fa, accessed 10 October 2025.

sinister intentions. Such practices can be even more insidious when applied to perceived human weaknesses, particularly related to the desire to love and be loved, addiction, and willingness for sacrifice. The smoke extends to the horse racing track, the park, the dance floor, the high street, or even to Gardel's *Por una cabeza*.

Because *Îngrijirea tenului* and *Noblesse de Robe* occupy opposite ends of the coercion–agency spectrum, their similarities are best understood in relation to that dichotomy. The nature of their texts diverges significantly. *Îngrijirea tenului* is grounded in the emerging field of cosmetology, merging aspects of dermatology, cosmetics, and aesthetics. *Noblesse de Robe* intertwines literature, history, psychology, and fashion, reflecting the author's subjective experiences and insights. *Îngrijirea tenului* received strong advertising throughout the Romanian press, while Marthe Bibesco's fashion essays book was significantly promoted in international circles, though it garnered substantially less attention in her home country of Romania. Another key differentiation point was the direct impact on readers owing to editorial and physical traits. *Îngrijirea tenului* likely became popular among Romanian women in cities like Bucharest as a beauty manual connected to cosmetology and medicine. *Noblesse de Robe* gained recognition as a literary work informed by Bibesco's reputation and ties to *Vogue*, but remained unaffordable to middle-class Romanians in the late 1920s. Voina's book, described as "elegant," adhered to the typical appearance of standard trade paperbacks from interwar Romania. Bibesco's work was published in both a premium hardback edition and a standard paperback format, specifically designed to meet the demands of the international book market. Considering all these aspects, it is safe to assume *Îngrijirea tenului* was affordable for middle-class women, while *Noblesse de Robe* was likely out of reach for this demographic. This discrepancy reflects socioeconomic complexities within and outside Greater Romania's borders. Arguably, Bibesco added a thin smoke around her characters' identities, while Voina employed a concentrated haze around his technical advice, in contrast to his clear ideologizations.

The separation between *Îngrijirea tenului* and *Noblesse de Robe* is not only marked by different, if not diverging, target audiences, values, and ideas. They also represent the two decades in Romanian women's history. Both works were written shortly after the midpoint of their respective decade and published in the following years. Unlike other eugenic writings, even those penned by him, *Îngrijirea tenului* seems a benign, practical guide for women of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, encouraging women to be their own artists, but did not advocate for agency. Although *Noblesse de Robe* initially appears elitist and is often compared to Bibesco's earlier works, it is a pragmatic treatise on

fashion philosophy and deserves a place among the classics. On a subtler level, both books have a transatlantic connection with two cultural and organizational frameworks, and both aim to prevent or diminish the smoke clouding judgment. As intrinsically connected to fashion, beauty benefits from the same transnational and political qualities motivated by individual and collective identity creation.[84]

On the same day as Cotul's article, the right-leaning Bucharest daily *Curentul* [The Current] published another review of *Îngrijirea tenului* right beneath a text with deep religious themes by Romanian writer and theologian Gala Galaction. The unnamed reviewer praised Voina's manual as a valuable resource for women, emphasizing the need to help them as they can easily make mistakes regarding their bodies without proper guidance. The author framed this "elegant volume" as a genuine aid for women of all ages and backgrounds who lacked clear guidance on beauty-related challenges, drawing on Voina's expertise in and dedication to beauty science.[85] The book's description as "elegant" transcended the fringes of the ideological right, as the liberal daily *Lupta* [The Struggle] also embraced it.[86] Excerpts were broadcast live on national radio (Radio România) and on Bucharest's local station (Radio Bucureşti) in mid-June 1936.[87]

Interwar advice literature aimed at women was primarily based on traditional gender assumptions echoing those found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts. It presented these ideas as absolute truths. Influential elites believed it was necessary to guide women, attempting to balance agency and coercion in a century of rapid change and upheavals.[88] This literature, on both ends of the agency–coercion spectrum, was built around the idea that women needed direction and implied they would have difficulty making the right choices without it. On the agency end, Bibesco embodied the modern girl stereotype who championed the French fashion industry, predominantly driven by powerful women, as a firsthand account and a psychological, philosophical, and even sociological analysis of the inner workings of the fashion system, from haute couture houses to their clientele. On the coercion end, Aurel Voina, through *Îngrijirea tenului*, represented the new woman stereotype, positioning himself as a beauty and fashion expert and emphasizing a healthier

84 Bartlett, '"Can Fashion Be Defended?,'" in *Fashion and Politics*, ed. Djurdja Bartlett, 33.
85 "*Îngrijirea tenului* de Docent Dr. Aurel Voina" [Skincare by Assistant Dr. Aurel Voina], *Curentul*, 24 August 1936, 2.
86 "*Îngrijirea tenului*" [Skincare], *Lupta*, 21 June 1936, 2.
87 "Radio România şi Radio Bucureşti," *Universul*, 14 June 1936, 2. "Duminica. 14 iunie 1936" [Sunday. 14 June 1936], *Radio. Radiofonie – Televiziune – Ştiinţa pentru toţi* [Radio. Radiophony – Television – Science for All], 14 June 1936, 10.
88 Andraş, *The Women of 'Little Paris,'* 110–4.

lifestyle for women. His approach stood against the prevailing influences of the fashion world, suggesting that he could offer better insights than those already established in these fields. These two works exemplify the extreme ends of the agency–coercion spectrum, each vying for women's attention, involvement, and compliance in their attempts to teach women to live beyond the themes of *Por una cabeza* and *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*. However, the reality on the ground was far more nuanced and dynamic, as women frequently navigated and negotiated between these opposing extremes.

As Time Goes By: flowing patterns

Interwar popular songs were built around claims that the dynamics between men and women have remained consistent throughout history, whether shrouded in smoke, unrestrained by passions and addictions, or faced with harsh rejection. One notable expression of this postulate is the jazz standard *As Time Goes By*, created in 1931 by Herman Hupfeld,[89] and initially performed live by Frances Williams and first recorded by Rudy Vallée and His Connecticut Yankees.[90] Its most iconic moment came 11 years later in the 1942 movie *Casablanca*, directed by Michael Curtiz, starring Humphrey Bogart as Rick Blaine, Ingrid Bergman as Ilsa Lund, and Paul Henreid as Victor Laszlo,[91] where Dooley Wilson, in the role of Sam, sang a simplified version.[92] The song's last stanza reflects the enduring qualities of moonlight and love songs, capturing timeless emotions like passion, jealousy, and hatred, noting the perceived inevitable truth that women need men, and men must seek their partners. The narrative tells a classic story of love and ambition, highlighting the high stakes in pursuing love and glory. The film version omits the introductory context, emphasizing the key dynamics of romantic relationships. The song's repeated statement in all versions, that women depend on men to thrive, while men's role is to find a "mate," suggests

89 IMSLP, "As Time Goes By (Hupfeld, Herman)," Music Score Library, *International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP) / Petrucci Music Library*, 10 June 2023, https://imslp.org/wiki/As_Time_Goes_By_(Hupfeld%2C_Herman), accessed 10 October 2025.

90 Bastien, "Song: As Time Goes By Written by Herman Hupfeld," Song Covers Resource, *SecondHandSongs*, 2025, accessed 3 May 2025. https://secondhandsongs.com/work/7253/all, accessed 10 October 2025.

91 *Casablanca*, Directed by Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., 1943), accessed 3 May 2025. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0034583/, accessed 10 October 2025.

92 Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History. *As Time Goes By* Sheet Music (New York: Harms, Inc., 1941). National Museum of American History. ID and Catalog Number: 1984.0458.06. Record ID: nmah_680768, accessed 3 May 2025, https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_680768, accessed 10 October 2025.

a level of subordination for women. This concept, presented alongside other assumed axioms, offers a perspective that, while considered fundamental and indisputable, is rooted in a traditional framework betraying patriarchal views. Its theme could also serve as a possible explanation for the loss of control and confusion expressed in the two previous songs. Through *As Time Goes By*, the final piece of the musical puzzle, the coercion–agency narrative can be traced from the later part of the interwar era to the peak of the Second World War. The film only made it to Bucharest cinemas in 1946–1947,[93] far from its original context, with entropy arguably affecting the story's implied timelessness.

Both *Îngrijirea tenului* and *Noblesse de Robe* can be classified as advice literature for a particular female audience, reflecting their respective decades and serving as verbalizations and crystallizations of their authors' theories and philosophies about women's aesthetic presence. Unlike their reception when published as literary texts akin to Bibesco's previous popular works, the essays in *Noblesse de Robe* blended direct observation with psychology and philosophy, intertwined with literary, historical, and cultural references. Real-life personalities could appear several times in different essays, as seen with Coco Chanel (Mademoiselle, Gabrielle, Tote), which contemporary readers could recognize with relative ease. Reviewers for the international press also ventured into guessing the real individuals behind the characters. This is relevant as fashion itself blends individual assertions of the proverbial artiste with names like Chanel or Dior with the idea that fashion designers should be essentially interchangeable paragons of the larger fashion system.[94] In the case of fashion icons like Bibesco, the association can be made with the original artiste and the pan-historical, transnational brand name and company. But name recognition and creativity did not originate in a vacuum. As Valerie Steele observed, twentieth-century fashion professionals compared the luxury of the Ancien Régime to the prestige of Parisian haute couture, as 1930s designers shifted from modernist styles to lavish historic looks.[95] The essence of understanding fashion as a Parisienne lies in authenticity and creativity expressed outwardly through the choice of style, garment, and, if possible, designer. This emphasis on novelty and originality, however, contradicts the immemorial quality of social interactions described in *As Time Goes By* complete with its anachronistic view of gendered interactions.

93 "Cinematografe" [Cinematography], *Era Nouă*, 11 October 1946, 2.

94 Juliana Luna Mora and Jess Berry, "Creative Direction Succession in Luxury Fashion: The Illusion of Immortality at Chanel and Alexander McQueen," *Luxury* 9, no. 2–3 (2 September 2022): 118–9, https://doi.org/10.1080/20511817.2022.2194039.

95 Steele, "Paris, Capital of Fashion," in *Paris, Capital of Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele, 15.

On a subtler level, both books have a transatlantic connection, with Voina as a docent doctor and Rockefeller fellow and Bibesco to *Vogue*. These commonalities fade when exploring the distinct backgrounds and approaches of the two authors, extrapolating to their respective social context. His extensive formal education and recognition reflect considerable academic training in academic and journalistic writing. Bibesco was a prominent member of the Romanian nobility, with a notable background in Romanian culture and politics. Still, she lacked formal higher education, relying on education typical of noble women at the time and independent study to shape her literary voice. The two authors' diverging backgrounds and approaches can be extrapolated to their respective social, cultural, ideological, and political contexts. Aurel Voina studied in the United States but developed his career and reputation in Romania, for a Romanian audience. *Îngrijirea tenului* was crafted for the everyday female reader, focusing on practical advice without expecting prior knowledge, scientific jargon, or oblique allusions, primarily catering to Romanian middle-class women with some formal education. Although the *Noblesse de Robe* essays were initially aimed at the elite *Vogue* readership, they eventually reached a broader audience as a book. Voina's writing is straightforward, well structured, and accessible, while Bibesco's essays engaged an audience adept at philosophy, history, and literature. Both works emphasize the importance of education and ability to control one's life and future. Yet, all the songs mentioned in this paper suggest characters, behaviors, and ideas dissonant with both Bibesco and Voina's writings. This demonstrates the complexities and contradictions of interwar social, cultural, artistic, and political realities.

Despite not writing in Romanian or specifically for a Romanian audience, Bibesco was often identified in reviews as having Romanian identity, even as critics also praised her Frenchness and Parisienne perspective in discussions of *Noblesse de Robe*. She primarily wrote for those already engaged in fashion, as haute couture clients and creators, and those who could understand subtle cultural, social, and literary references. *Îngrijirea tenului* crystallized Aurel Voina's aesthetic and ideological stance, packaged into a guide for women that appeared scientifically sound and practical without hiding its eugenic and biopolitical undercurrents. He defined beauty as life's central driving force, suggesting it was an ongoing struggle where only the fittest survived. It was likely a veiled nod to social Darwinism, where individuals must strive for bodily perfection to ensure that future generations come as close to this ideal as scientifically possible.[96] For him, the traits of a healthy body could be either

96 Voina, *Îngrijirea tenului* [Skincare], 7.

acquired or inherited, and if a person's genetic characteristics were considered flaws, they could and should be improved. He believed perfect beauty was difficult but possible to achieve.[97]

Conclusion

As contextualized for this research, the advice literature addressed to women in interwar Romania exists along a continuum between two opposing forces: agency and coercion. At the agency end of this spectrum, the modern girl ideal is represented by dynamic exchanges on a tapestry of interlaced crafted elegance, streams, and colors, as seen in Marthe Bibesco's *Noblesse de Robe*, which connects the spirit of Paris with that of Bucharest. This view positions Parisian fashion excellence, and arguably exclusivity, as embodying the *esprit parisien* regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or social status. At the coercion end of the spectrum, Aurel Voina's *Îngrijirea tenului* exemplifies the new woman model, which combines academic, medical, and scientific rigor but carries darker undertones. This perspective shifts the understanding of beauty toward cosmetology, the science of beautification with eugenic implications. Such practices are framed as efforts to purify the body, mind, and soul, which can be taken to eugenic and biopolitical extremes.

On an ideological level, both authors adhered to a specific system of societal, cultural, and aesthetic categorization informed by their respective family, educational, and social milieux. The work's categorization likely informed the global echoes that frequently referred to the authors' type of education and credentials. Voina, despite his US education, built his career and reputation in Romania by writing primarily for a local audience. *Îngrijirea tenului* was designed to share his expertise beyond medical and scientific circles, making his knowledge about skincare accessible to everyday individuals interested in improving their skin health. Bibesco balanced her dual identity as Romanian and Parisian, a factor that shaped the international reception of *Noblesse de Robe*. As background music for these ideas, *Por una cabeza* emphasizes the dangers of uncontrolled passion, *Zaraza* is the model both Bibesco and Voina's readers should avoid, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* warns against losing one's reasoning capabilities, and *As Time Goes By* describes and embraces perceived innate, ancient human qualities.

The impact can be observed in how the books reached and impacted their readers' lives. *Îngrijirea tenului* likely had decent sales prompting several

97 Voina, *Îngrijirea tenului* [Skincare], 13.

reprints, while *Noblesse de Robe* only gained faint recognition in Romania as a book. The accessibility of *Îngrijirea tenului* contrasted with the exclusivity of *Noblesse de Robe*. Notably, 1930s Romanian press reviews of Bibesco's later works consistently mentioned it alongside two of her most celebrated oeuvres, also published with Grasset, namely *The Green Parrot* (1924) and the more recent *Catherine-Paris* (1927). This complex interweaving highlights the broader socioeconomic disparities in interwar advice literature readership in Romania and beyond.

Advice literature aimed at interwar Romanian women can be understood as existing on a spectrum between agency and coercion. On one end, these dynamic exchanges embody crafted elegance, exemplified by Bibescu's reinterpretation of *Noblesse de Robe*, connecting *esprit parisien* to *spirit bucureștean*. On the other end, the negotiation incorporates academic, medical, and scientific rigor with darker undertones. From a gendered perspective, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* is the only song in this paper's playlist that does not specify the gender of the mesmerized singer or main character. All the others imply women enchant men who lose control over their own thoughts and actions. This perspective shifts the notion of beauty towards cosmetics and cosmetology, which are seen as sciences of beautification. These practices are understood to purify the body, mind, and soul from the alleged "ugliness" that Voina, as a eugenicist, would describe as "disgenic." Women's fashion and beauty ideas and practices were thus negotiated between these two extremes, creating a complex, panoramic image of the gendered innerworkings of interwar Romanian society expressed through words and music. Fashion and beauty negotiations through advice literature and music on the agency–coercion spectrum yield a complex, nuanced image of interwar Romanian gender dynamics, adding depth, innovative ideas, and connections to the knowledge of gender and Romanian studies.

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